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ABSTRACT

A modular lesson has four characteristics: it is composed of discrete units, it may be evaluated, it can be accomplished by everyone in the class, and the sum of its modules results in a practical accomplishment. A modular lesson that has been designed to aid high school students and college freshmen in writing research papers requires less than nine one-hour periods of class time to complete, with most of the time involving students in the use of content area resources. The individual modules of the lesson focus on library orientation, use of indexes, overviewing, notetaking for a theme article, assembling the bibliography, organizing an introduction, organizing the body of the paper, citing references, and assembling a summary. (RL)

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A Modular Lesson for Writing Research Papers In Content Area Classes

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Running head: A Modular Lesson . . .

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A MODULAR LESSON FOR WRITING RESEARCH PAPERS

IN CONTENT AREA CLASSES

Abstract

A modular lesson is composed of discrete units. Each unit is an entity by itself, is able to be evaluated, and can be accomplished by everyone in the class. In addition, the sum of the modules must result in a practical skill. A modular lesson developed to aid high school students and college freshmen to write research papers is described. Having completed the modules in the lesson, a research paper with an introduction, logically organized and properly referenced text, a conclusion, and a bibliography will have been assembled. Constructing a research paper is prerequisite to instruction on effective expression within a research paper. The modular lesson described generally requires less than nine one-hour periods of class time to complete; and most of this time involves the use of content area resources. A modular lesson reduces the construction of a research paper to discrete, manageable units and insures that every student will assemble a completed paper. For these reasons a modular lesson on research papers can be the ideal format for integrating functional writing instruction with content area instruction.

A Modular Lesson for Writing Research Papers In Content Area Classes

A perennial complaint of college instructors, even at the graduate level, is that students are unable to write research papers. College instructors do not teach students how to assemble the papers because, they allege, the required time is simply not available. And, of course, this is the same exhoneration which high school content area teachers claim. And even English teachers can rationalize that the curriculum is so crowded that they can't provide the attention to this topic that would enable students to acquire efficient and independent skills.

However, rather than being a surrogate for content area instruction, research paper writing can be an alternative method of providing that instruction. It has the advantage of encouraging independent and synthetic thought. By allowing student latitude in the range of topics to be selected, the probability is raised that the students will be motivated and that they will view the instruction as an explorative type of problem solving. Additionally, a research instructional unit is an interruption of classroom routine and, for this reason alone, can be an effective learning technique. By presenting a research unit as a set of modules, student and teacher attention to the formal requirements of writing the paper is minimized to the degree that the lesson becomes a content area lesson.

A modular lesson has four characteristics. It is composed of discrete units, is able to be evaluated, can be accomplished by everyone

in the class, and the sum of the modules results in a practical accomplishment. A modular lesson that was developed to aid high school students and college freshmen in writing research papers is outlined.

Module 1 -- Library Orientation

Objective: Use the card catalogue to identify available books and the location of those books.

Activity: Only those features of the cards which are essential to identifying and locating topics, titles, and authors are explained.

Evaluation: The students answer questions which require them to search the card catalogue and locate books. (e.g. How many books are there in the library which discuss wine making? How many books written by Sinclair Lewis are in the library? Who wrote Vanity Fair? Locate the book with the following call number and identify it...)

Module 2 -- Indexes

Objective: Use an index to determine a topic.

Activity: The students consult the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature. They select a topic that interests them and on which there are at least 10 references. They use the card catalogue to confirm whether the library contains those periodicals.

Evaluation: The students transfer each reference from the R.G.P.L. to the top of a 4 x 6 index card.

Module 3 -- Overviewing

Objective: Locate the magazines or journals containing the ten referenced articles and overview the articles.

Activity: Using the card catalogue to locate the periodicals, the students overview them. To overview, they read only the first paragraph of an article, the initial sentences of the succeeding paragraphs (which will generally be the paragraph theme sentences), and the entire last paragraph.

Evaluation: After overviewing an article, students write three summary sentences about that article, beneath the reference, on the 4 x 6 index card. They turn the card over and write one sentence expressing what they liked best about the article; and they write one sentence expressing what they liked least.

Smith, J. Teenage alcoholism. Medical Review 1977, 8, 97-106

1. Teenage alcoholism often originates from social pressures.
2. Teenage alcoholism has tripled over the past 10 years.
3. Surveys show that teenagers don't consider alcohol a serious problem.

What I liked best:	The author interviewed teenagers to get their views.
What I liked least:	The author criticized teenage alcoholics as weak without discussing the influence of their parents.

Module 4 -- Theme Article

Objective: Critically read an article.

Activity: From the 10 overviewed articles the students select the article which they find most convincing. They read this entire article.

Evaluation: As they read this article, they copy quotes onto index cards. They copy one quote on each card and write THEME ARTICLE across the top of each card. They also write THEME ARTICLE across the overview card that they have designated as the theme article.

Module 5 -- Bibliography

Objective: Assemble a bibliography.

Activity: The students arrange the 10 overview cards in alphabetical order according to authors' last names. (If an author is not identified, substitute the name of the magazine.)

Evaluation: They copy the information at the tops of the alphabetically arranged cards onto a sheet of paper with the word BIBLIOGRAPHY at the head.

Module 6 -- Introduction

Objective: Assemble an introduction.

Activity: The students read through the overview cards and compile a list of any questions which the paper can answer.

Evaluation: The list of questions is rearranged from general to specific (e.g., What is alcoholism? Is teenage alcoholism increasing? Are there innovative programs attempting to reduce teenage alcoholism . . .) From this list, they write a paragraph stating the purpose of the research paper and identifying the questions the paper will address.

Module 7 -- Body

Objective: Organize the body of the paper.

Activity: Read through the overview cards attending to the information on both sides. On the basis of the critical remarks about what students liked best and least, they should decide whether they primarily agree or disagree with the article. If they agree, they place a "+" in the upper right corner of the card's front side. If they disagree, they mark the card with a "-".

Evaluation: The students answer the first question in the introduction. They read through the decks of overview and theme article cards and set aside any cards which contain information pertaining to that question. They assemble this deck of pertinent information with the "+" cards followed by the "-" cards, which are followed by the theme article cards. They answer the question from the introduction by listing information with which they disagree. They then describe information with which they

agree. And they conclude by citing quotes from the theme article which support their position. The students answer the next question in the same manner.

Module 8 -- Referencing

Objective: Cite references for information that is used.

Activity: The students cite the appropriate source for the material they've used to assemble the body.

Evaluation: Any conventional method of referencing may be used by the student. The most simple format is for the students to place the author's name and the year of the publication, which will already have been listed in the bibliography, in parentheses after the paraphrased information or quote, e.g., "...causes alcoholism" (Smith, 1977).

Module 9 -- Summary

Objective: Assemble a summary.

Activity: The students write a summary paragraph that recapitulates the material in the body of the paper.

Evaluation: The students restate the questions in the introduction as declarative statements. (e.g., Restating the introductory questions in Module 6: Alcoholism is a disease which is genetic, psychological, and social in origin. Teenage alcoholism has tripled over the past decade. The Rockford Hospital Plan is an innovative program which deals with the psychological...)

Having compiled the nine modules, which generally will require nine one-hour class periods, the students will have assembled a research paper. If there is a required length for the paper, and some students satisfy this requirement after answering the initial three questions of an introduction with seven questions, then they merely eliminate the last four questions. Similarly, if students exhaust all the questions they have initially posed and still haven't written a paper sufficiently long, they should try to generate additional questions rather than return to the library for more research.

One can object that the preceding modular lesson will not produce a superlative paper. The lesson will teach students to use only one index instead of several. The introduction and body are organized simplistically. There is no attention to grammar or clarity of expression. These objections are appropriate; and instruction which was more comprehensive would certainly produce superior papers. However, more comprehensive instruction can follow this unit. For it is much easier to design a lesson on how to improve a research paper which everyone in a class has written than to incorporate such instruction into the paper's initial construction. For if the initial instructional unit becomes too unwieldy, the chances increase that the unit will not be accessible to everyone and that the unit will be too cumbersome to be incorporated into content area instruction.

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everyone in the class. In addition, the sum of the modules must result in a practical skill. A modular lesson developed to aid high school students and college freshmen to write research papers was described. Having completed the modules in the lesson, a research paper with an introduction, logically organized and properly referenced text, a conclusion, and a bibliography will have been assembled. Constructing a research paper is prerequisite to instruction on effective expression within a research paper. The modular lesson described generally requires less than nine one-hour periods of class time to complete; and most of this time involves the use of content area resources. A modular lesson reduces the construction of a research paper to discrete, manageable units and insures that every student will assemble a completed paper. For these reasons a modular lesson on research papers can be the ideal format for integrating functional writing instruction with content area instruction.